

EN AND IT

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Why those buxom 3D babes just leave me feeling flat

Call me unreasonable, but when I'm battling against the forces of evil I like to keep more than just my nipples covered.

Not so Sara "Pez" Pezzini, New York Police Department homicide detective and wielder of the Witchblade — the weapon that enables her to eclipse the comparatively dowdy babes of *NYPD Blue* and become "a modern-day avenging angel, fighting evil in a corrupt and shadowy city". Oh, and a pretty hot piece of ass, too.

Sara, unsurprisingly, is a mate of Lara's — you can't fool me with that "Lara, who?" Lucozade Lara, Lara Croft, she of the unfeasibly large bosoms, teensy-weensy shorts, awesome firepower: top toto of Tomb Raider. Lara Croft represents all things fine and British in the Millennium Dome (well, it's already been a bad year for Florence Nightingale) and is, some would say, a role model for women.

Who exactly would say that? Slavering 15-year-old boys locked in onanistic reveries in front of their Playstations, that's who.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for sex, and I don't have a real problem with the violence of computer games either. Blaming events such as the Littleton massacre on Lara and her chums ignores statistics from Japan, where violent computer games and savage Manga comics are even more widely available and yet schoolchildren don't seem to feel the need to go and slaughter their playmates.

It's the boredom that gets me. Here in front of me is the Fantastic First Issue of *Tomb Raider/Witchblade*, a glossy mag for devotees published by Marvel Comics. Says Sara to Lara: "So, you're telling me that a demon was released from a black pearl inside a magical talisman and is carrying out a 90-year-old man's personal vendetta? And that you have been chasing this demon, know where it is, and want to go kill it?"

Says Lara to Sara: "I told you, you wouldn't believe me..."

Damn straight sister, I wouldn't believe you either. I'm cool with demons and talismans, but they have to be deployed with more finesse than that required to wield an Uzi —



**by Erica Wagner
Literary Editor**

a skill that Lara's creators clearly do not possess.

I hear you cry foul: Lara's defenders will say that her creators aren't trying to tell us any kind of story, really. They know we just want to rack up the body count. Which is fine as far as it goes, I guess. But couldn't there be more?

I like a bit of escapism as much as the next fantasist, but there needs to be a bit of meat on the bones that isn't instantly blasted to a bloody pulp by machine-gun fire. I sometimes look at people playing computer games and think: that looks fun, that looks intense, I could get into that. Then I look at what's really going on and I think I'd rather read a book. Or go to the movies instead.

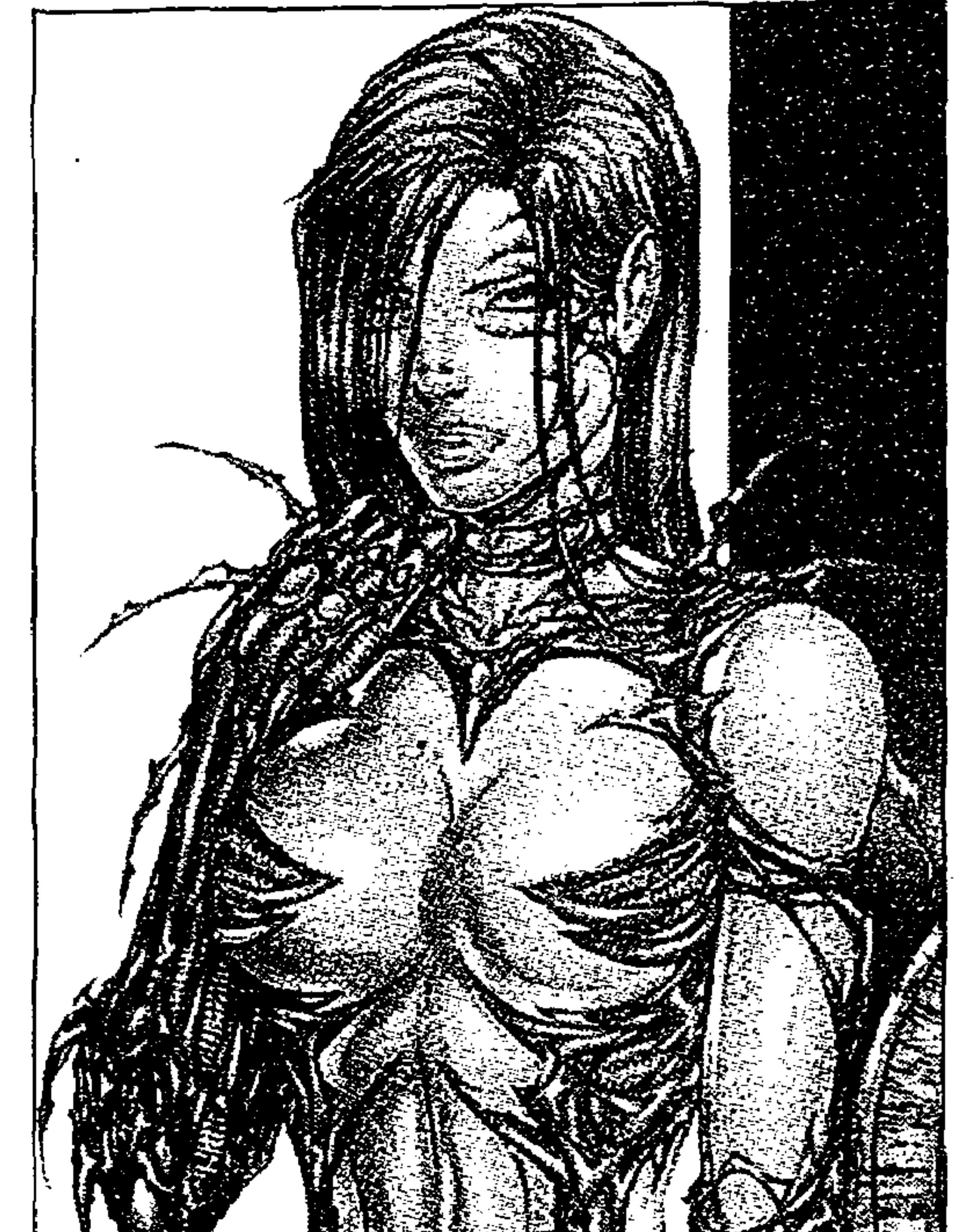
Although, I've just seen the *Phantom Menace*, and I'm not so sure. I'm a dedicated *Star Wars* fan (so maybe now you can stop thinking, Literary Editor of *The Times*, what the hell does she know about having fun?) but I flew to the States for the opening weekend and was, of course, disappointed.

One of the reasons the *Phantom Menace* is a

bad movie is because it refuses to embrace the human dynamic that gives its predecessor hyperdrive: *Star Wars* is a buddy movie that happens to be set in a galaxy far, far away; *The Phantom Menace*, with its cardboard characters and astonishing effects, is a computer game you don't even get to play (though of course you do: you can now buy the game here before the film is released).

I'm not a spoilsport. I just need room to manoeuvre: not down a graffiti-scarred alleyway toting a lethal crowbar (that's *Kingpin*, coming soon to a terminal near you), but in my own mind. I need a good reason for looking round the corner of the alley to see what lies in store for me. Just another bad guy isn't quite enough.

Yet I'm sure there's hope for me. Sony has already trademarked something they call "emotion synthesis". Its aim is to involve you in games the way you become involved in films: a terrain that films themselves — *Strange Days*, *eXistenZ*, *The Matrix* — have already begun to explore. That's what I want. I love to read, to listen to stories and go to the movies because I want to be swept out of myself and into another place. Just now — despite astounding 3D graphics and flawless violence synthesis — I can't find that place inside my PC screen.



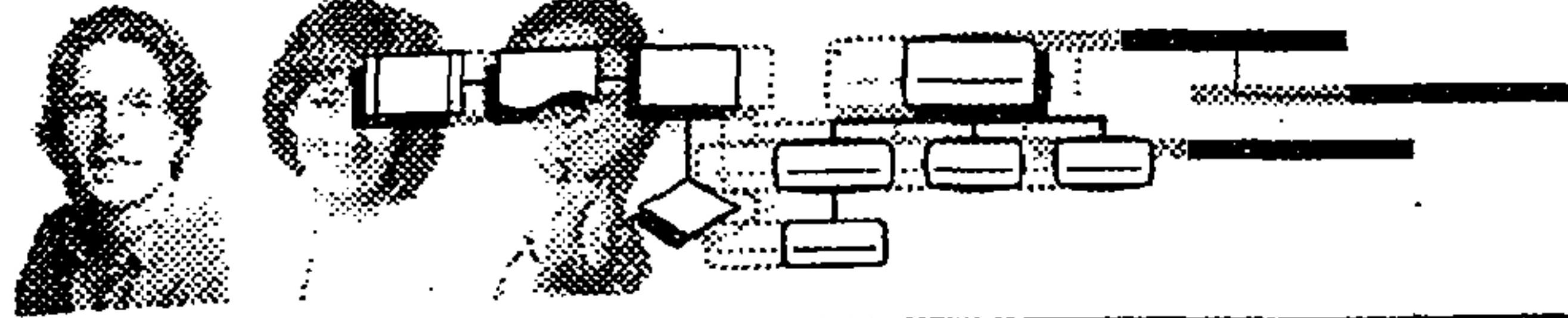
Impressive weaponry: Witchblade, aka Sara

LARA'S CHARACTER — IT'S THE BOTTOM LINE

A CROFT'S physical appearance — amply endowed — may be unrealistic, but female gamers say it's her character that is so appealing. Independent, intelligent and a dark horse, she allows females to project their own personalities onto their heroine. Eidos, the

company behind the Tomb Raider series, says research suggests around 5 per cent of regular Lara gamers are female. With the rise of "girl power" those figures are doubtless growing — female postees regularly contribute to Lara newsgroups, some of which are moderated or run by girls.

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